Taking Care of our Mental Formations and Perceptions

Dear Sangha, today is the 3rd of August, 1998, and we are in the Upper Hamlet for our Dharma talk in English.

This is a story for the young people, about the moon, because tomorrow night we are going to celebrate the welcoming of the moon. We will spend time singing and walking and performing and cake eating in the moonlight, in the Upper Hamlet. Every young person is invited, and all the less young people are also invited.

The children in my country used to look at the moon when it was full, and they would always see a tree in the moon, a tree with lots of leaves. The tree looks like a Banyan. If you look very carefully, you will see that there is a tree in the moon. And if you look more carefully, you will see that there is a man standing at the foot of the tree, and trying to reach the leaves. I think if you look hard, you will see that: a tree with a man. The children in Vietnam called that man *Cuoi.* Cuoi is someone who does not always tell the truth. Sometimes we say, "You lie like Cuoi." How come that Cuoi is there on the moon and does not live with us, among humans? There is a story that every child in Vietnam knows.

Cuoi was about twenty-one years old, and he was a logger. One day he went to the forest to chop wood, and suddenly he saw four baby tigers. He did not have enough compassion, so he used his axe and he struck the four baby tigers, and they all died. Suddenly he heard the voice of the mother tiger coming back, and he got so scared that he dropped his axe, and he climbed very quickly into a tree. What did he see? He saw the mother tiger crying, and suffering very much. But after that the mother tiger went to a nearby corner of the forest, and she took a number of leaves from a little tree. She chewed these leaves very carefully, mixing them with her saliva, and she tried to put it on the wounds of the baby tigers. About an hour and a half later, all the baby tigers came back to life. It was a miracle! Cuoi was near the top of the tree, and he saw everything. He was afraid that the mother tiger would kill him if he came down, so he stayed very still. He did not even dare to breathe deeply. He tried to breathe very smoothly, trying not to make any noise.

After seeing that the four baby tigers were okay, their mother thought that this was not a safe place for her children. So she took them, one by one, in her mouth, and she brought them to another area of the forest. The mother tiger loved her children very much. She could not use her paws, as she did not have hands, so she used her mouth to carry her babies one by one to a safe place. When the last baby tiger was gone, Cuoi began to come down, and he went home. He did not say anything to anyone, but he had an idea: he would like to bring back that little tree with the leaves that could heal serious wounds of the people, and plant that tree in his back yard.

About a week later he went to the forest, this time with tools that could help him to take the tree home. He spent the whole morning digging and digging, and finally he lifted the tree onto his shoulder, and he slowly went home. When he got home, he dug a very big hole in the back yard, and he planted that tree. He watered that tree every day, taking very good care of it. He was lucky-the tree survived, and began to grow beautifully.

One day, he wanted to try his medicinal tree, so he took a big stick, and he hit his dog. Cuoi was not a very kind or very gentle person. Now you know why no little boy in Vietnam has the name of Cuoi: because Cuoi is equivalent to "not kind," "not telling the truth." He hit his dog so hard that the dog was nearly dead, and a lot of blood came out. So he went to the back yard and took three or four leaves, and put them into his mouth and chewed them, and then used a kind of plaster, and put it on the wound of the dog. After just one hour the dog could stand up and run again. So he became a healer. If there was someone in the village who was sick, he would go to the house and offer to heal that person. In the beginning, no one believed in him, because he was not used to telling the truth. But finally, people said, "Oh, there is no harm; he does not charge anything." He said that he had a medicine that can heal in one or two hours, and so they let him try. And he helped so many people in the village, so he began to get a reputation as a good healer. But he kept his therapy very secret.

One day the daughter of the village head, the mayor, was very sick, and no doctor could help. The daughter was about to die. So the mayor announced that whomever could heal his daughter would get her as a wife. He would marry his daughter to anyone who could heal her sickness. Cuoi thought that this was his chance, so he came and offered his help. Of course, with that kind of medicinal tree, he could heal the daughter of the mayor, and finally he got permission to marry that beautiful lady.

You know already what happened-that beautiful lady was not happy, because Cuoi was not very kind, and he did not always tell the truth. I don’t think that Cuoi practiced the Fourth Mindfulness Training. I don’t think that Cuoi practiced the First Mindfulness Training very well. That is why he was not a happy person, he was grouchy, he was irritable; so the lady suffered quite a lot. Cuoi did not take good care of his wife, and he did not want to take care of anything in his home, except for one thing: the tree. He was very careful with the tree. He did not want any one, any animal, anything to come close to the tree. He told his wife never to throw anything dirty near the tree, and especially not to pour the dishwashing water close to the roots of the tree.

Cuoi’s wife was intelligent, and she understood. She knew that she should not throw garbage or dirty water close to the tree; but he kept saying that almost every day, and that irritated her very much. One day, when he was hardly gone, she wanted to retaliate. She went into the back yard, and do you know what she did? She tried to pee on the tree. Out of anger, out of frustration with her husband. You know, things like that do happen from time to time. She was pouring all her anger and frustration on the tree by peeing on its roots.

Unfortunately, that day Cuoi forgot something, so he came back to his home, and he went to the back yard. He saw that the tree was becoming uprooted. The tree had shaken violently after the act committed by Cuoi’s wife; the tree did not want to stay

there anymore, and it began to fly up. Cuoi saw that! He did not want to lose the tree, as it was his only means of survival. He screamed, and he jumped up and clung to the tree, trying to pull it down. But the tree was stronger than Cuoi. He had been a logger, and was very strong, but the tree was stronger. So the tree carried him higher and higher and higher, and when he was very high, he was so afraid of letting go, because if he let go he would drop down and die. So the tree carried him higher and higher until it reached the moon. So that is why every time you look at the moon you see a tree with a man underneath-Cuoi, who is still clinging to the tree. That is the belief of so many generations of Vietnamese children. Cuoi, because of his failure to practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings, was exiled from Earth, and had to live a life of seclusion on the moon. It’s not very warm up there during the night, and not very fresh during the day. The tree survived okay, but Cuoi suffered a lot.

Tomorrow night, let us try to look up at the moon. If we have luck, there will be no clouds, and we can contemplate the moon, and practice looking. We might identify the medicine tree on the moon, and also Cuoi. Some people in Vietnam believe that each in autumn a few leaves from the tree fall down to the Earth, and whoever has the luck of finding a leaf can use it to heal his or her sickness. So, someday, if you see a leaf landing on you, be careful with it, because that leaf might have come from the tree on the moon.

When I was in Vietnam, I used to participate in Full Moon festivals of children in the countryside. I knew that everyone knew that story. That is why I offered to tell the next half of the story, which has not been told. This is the next half of the story; but it’s not entirely complete, so after I tell you, please help me to finish it. It needs a final touch.

The United States of America and the Soviet Union wanted to work on a joint project, sending a few astronauts to the moon. I don’t know what they wanted to do there, but they wanted to send four astronauts to the moon to do some sort of research: two Russians and two Americans. The project went well. A spacecraft carrying four astronauts was launched, and it landed on the moon. The astronauts began to do some research, but after a few days they noticed that their engine was flawed. There was something wrong with the spacecraft, and they discovered that they could not go home to the earth with that engine. So they wired America, they wired Russia, calling for help, because their supply of oxygen was good for only another five days. If Earth could not send another spacecraft in time, then they would have to die on the moon.

So the government of the United States, and the government of the Soviet Union were conversing with each other, trying to find ways to help the four astronauts. Scientists everywhere were using telephones to discuss how to rescue the four astronauts, and the news was printed in every newspaper, and announced every day on the radio. But no one, even the brightest scientists, could find a way to rescue the four men on the moon.

That day, a water buffalo boy in the countryside of Vietnam, when he brought his water buffaloes home, heard the news. He knew that everyone in the world was thinking hard about how to bring the four astronauts home. Suddenly he burst out laughing, and he said, "That’s easy!" and people in his home asked: "How is it easy?"

He said, "I have an idea that will bring the four astronauts home, but I will not tell you. Please allow me to meet with the mayor, because I think this is going to work." At first they did not believe the little buffalo boy, because he was so young. But this buffalo boy was not named Cuoi, and he never lied to people. He was a very gentle young boy, so when he said that, the people agreed to arrange a meeting between him and the mayor of the village. This is what he proposed: he said that they should all go to, the Banyan tree, the medicine tree, and that they should climb it, and they should put their seatbelts on, so as to be sure not to fall out of the tree. After everything was ready, they had to begin to pee on the tree. And after that, the tree would uproot itself, and go up and bring the four astronauts back to the Earth.

That was his proposal. If the tree had gone to the moon in that way, it could return to the

Earth in the same way. But he did not say anything about Cuoi. I don’t know whether he forgot, or whether he intentionally did not want to mention Cuoi, since that was also a chance for Cuoi to come home.

The young boy who made this proposal used to take care of water buffaloes. In Vietnam, many of us do not use tractors; many of us still use water buffaloes to pull a plow, to plow the field for planting rice. That way we don’t need gasoline, we only need grass for the buffalo to eat. Because the water buffalo works very hard to help the farmers to plow the land, they are considered to be friends of humans, and we Vietnamese never eat the flesh of water buffalo, because we consider them to be our friends. It is like in India, where no one eats the flesh of the cows, because the cows are very helpful to every Indian citizen. Cows carry things, and help in several ways-even the cow dung is used. Everything from the cow can be used to help make daily life easier, and that is why our Indian friends never have the heart to eat the flesh of the cows. From time to time they use leather from cows, but that does not mean that they have to kill the cow in order to get the skin. No, they have to wait until the cow dies in order to get the skin to make into leather. So, if you go to India and you see that there are people who use leather products, that doesn’t mean that they have killed the cows. So you have to look deeply to understand. In Vietnam the same thing is true with the water buffaloes. We know that the water buffaloes work very hard to pull the plow and help us, and that is why we take very good care of water buffaloes, and buffalo boys always consider the water buffaloes to be their friends.

I have had the opportunity to ride water buffaloes myself. It’s very nice. One day I just lay down on the back of a water buffalo. It was warm and soft, and the buffalo knew the way home, and just brought me home like that. Many buffalo boys enjoy going home sitting on the back of their water buffalo, and they play the flute. Some of them use lotus leaves to shelter themselves from the sunshine, and go home that way, very beautifully.

So, the buffalo boys usually have three things. The first thing is a scythe to cut the grass to feed the buffaloes at home; the second thing is a flute, because they like to play flute while sitting on the back of the buffalo; and the third thing is a lotus leaf to shelter them from the hot sunshine. Those are their belongings. Don’t think that the life of a water buffalo boy is hard. No, a buffalo boy can be very happy.

So, our young man who proposed the strategy to bring the four astronauts home was such a buffalo boy. After he had proposed the strategy, he continued to watch the moon each night. One day, he did not see the tree on the moon, and he did not see Cuoi, either. So he knew that the four astronauts had been rescued. He was so happy because he had been able to save the lives of four people, two Russians and two Americans. But a week later, he did not know why, looking at the moon, he saw the tree again, and he saw Cuoi again. He did not understand. When he looked at the moon one week ago, he did not see either the tree or Cuoi, so he believed that Cuoi was home on Earth again. But now, looking up at the moon, he saw that the tree was there, and Cuoi was there, as before. He just did not understand why.

This is why I think you have to help me, to shed light on the matter, to find out why Cuoi had returned to Earth, and why he didn't like it here, and why he wanted to go back to the moon. I think you need to learn a lot of psychology in order to understand. So maybe today, during your Dharma discussion, you will discuss why, after having been exiled from Earth for so many thousands of years, Cuoi did not want to stay with us, among humans. He must have found life here difficult, so he preferred to live alone on the moon. He knew the technique to get back to the moon. Tomorrow we will celebrate the coming of the moon together. We shall be able to look up at the moon together. But today, let us think a little bit about what happened to Mr. Cuoi, and his medicine tree.

When we hear the small bell, you may stand up and bow to the Sangha before you go out. (The children leave the meditation hall to go outside and play.)

(Bell)

Quand je respire avec les feuilles des grands chenes, je deviens la fraicheur des feuilles, la joie, et la couleur verte. "When I breathe with the leaves of the big oak trees, I become the freshness of these leaves, and the joy of their green color." In fact, this is possible, because perception is made of subject and object of perception, the perceiver and the perceived. When you are really in touch, you become what you touch with your perception. When you see peace, you become peace. When you touch stability, you become stability. The perceiver and the perceived are not separate entities. When you have a great thought, you become the greatness of that thought. When the object of your love is freedom, is stability, then you become freedom and stability. All of us know that the subject and the object of cognition are always together.

Conscience, c'est toujours conscience de quelque chose. "Consciousness is always consciousness of something." Mindfulness also; mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. When you have mindfulness of the blue sky, you become the blue sky, and the separation is removed.

Quand je regarde le bleu du ciel, je deviens sa legerete, sa purete et sa limpidite. "When I look at the blue sky, I become the lightness of the blue sky, I become the purity of the blue sky, and her clarity."

Quand je danse avec le vent, je deviens sa liberte. "When I dance with the wind, I become her liberty."

Je ne suis pas ce moi limite par son manque d'energie, enferme dans ses habitudes negatives, egoistes, et etroite. "I am not caught in this limited self and its lack of energy, and imprisoned in its negative habits, egoism, and narrowness."

Je suis aussi ce que je vois, ce que j'entends, ce que je touche, ce que je respire, ce que je pense. "I am also what I see, what I hear, what I touch, what I breathe, and what I think."

Je deviens la douceur orange de la carotte, la fraicheur verte de la salade, quand je les mange. "I become the orange sweetness of the carrots, the green freshness of the lettuce when I eat them."

Je ne suis pas un moi separe, je suis ce donc je me nourris. "I am not a separate self; I am what I feed myself." This is good, because you know that everything you consume becomes you, and with mindfulness you know what to consume and what not to consume. That is the practice of the Fifth Mindfulness Training.

Seigneur Bouddha, puisse je toujours pratiquer l'ecoute profonde, et toujours finir par entendre ta voix qui penetre et traverse tout le cosmos. "Lord Buddha, I wish I could always practice deep listening, that I could always listen to your voice that penetrates and goes through all the cosmos."

Bien aime Avalokiteshvara, puisse tu grandir en moi, et aider, sauver, proteger, liberer, tous les etres qui souffrent. "Beloved Avalokiteshvara, please grow up in me and help save, protect, protect and free all living beings who suffer."

Je suis ton ardent disciple. "I am a wholehearted disciple of yours."

Pardon pour ma peur, mon manque de courage et d'energie. "Please forgive my fear, my lack of courage and energy."

Aidez-moi a me transformer afin que je deviens la continuite de ta main, de ta parole, de ton coeur, de ton esprit; et que je sois admis a ton cote, pour oeuvrer avec toi au bien-etre de tous les etres. "Help me to transform, so that I become your continuation, the continuation of your hand, of your words, of your heart, and of your mind, that I could be admitted to your side, in order to help you in the work of bringing well being to all living beings."

There are moments when we have insight like that. There are moments when we can walk like that, when we can look like that, when we can touch like that, and these are moments of happiness. But the essential thing is to continue learning how to look like that, how to touch like that, how to think like that, how to walk like that. With the presence of the Sangha around us, that should be possible, because we are supported by the Sangha. The Sangha is a community of brothers and sisters who are dedicated to the practice, who are trying to do very much the same thing.

The practice is not just sitting, the practice is looking, the practice is thinking, the practice is touching, the practice is drinking,

eating, and so on. The quality of our practice depends on its content, namely the energy of mindfulness and concentration. Every act, every breath, every step, can help us to become more of our selves, to get more of that energy of mindfulness and concentration. When I join my palms to greet a child, or to greet an adult, that is not for the sake of being polite. That is my practice. I don't do it like a machine, because doing it like a machine would be the opposite of practice. In joining my two palms, I realize the oneness of body and mind. My left hand is like my body, my right hand is like my spirit, and they come together, and suddenly I arrive at the state of oneness of body and mind. The oneness of body and mind is the fruit of practice that you can get right away-you don't have to wait until eight days later, or a few months later.

We can achieve oneness of body and mind every moment: bringing back the mind to the body, suddenly you are there, fully present and fully alive. It is very quick. You are using your palms, you are making a flower with your two palms. It is beautiful in appearance, and it must be beautiful on the inside. When you do this, your mind and your body come together, and you produce your true presence. You come fully alive. It is a living being that is bowing to a child, or to a friend, and that is not for the sake of being polite. The Buddha said that we should not be caught in rituals. When you do something deeply, and authentically, that looks like a ritual. When you drink, you pick up a glass of water and you drink it; if you are truly concentrated in your act of drinking, it looks like a ritual. It is true that when you walk with all your being you invest one hundred percent of yourself into making a step. Mindfulness and concentration become a reality, and that step generates the energy of mindfulness and concentration that make life possible and deep and real. If you make a second step like that, the same kind of energy is generated and maintained. Walking like that, it looks like you are performing a rite. But in fact you are not performing-you are just living deeply every moment of your daily life.

Eating breakfast is the same. You can try to eat breakfast as a practice, and eating breakfast like that can be very powerful. It generates the energy of mindfulness and concentration that make life authentic during the time of eating breakfast. When you prepare breakfast, breakfast making can also be a practice. You can be really alive, fully present and very happy during breakfast making. It is no longer considered to be hard work, but a privilege. It depends on your way of looking. The cold water is available, the hot water is available, the soap is available, the kettle is available, the fire is available; everything is there in order to make your happiness a possibility. If you are not there, if you are caught in your worries and anger by the past and by the future, although you are making breakfast, you are not alive, you don't enjoy breakfast making. Breakfast making can be very nourishing. If someone sees you making breakfast that way, he or she will be impressed, and he or she will have a chance to go back to himself or herself and become alive. You are giving a Dharma talk with your way of making breakfast. So eating breakfast is the same.

The principle of the practice is simple: to bring our minds back to our bodies, to produce our true presence, to become fully alive, and there you are! Everything is happening under the light of mindfulness. In the Jewish tradition, and in the Christian tradition, we used to say "doing everything as though in the presence of God." God is witnessing everything that is happening to us. The kitchen is also a place for practice. If you are in the Jewish tradition, you know that to lay the table, to pour the milk, to cook the food is also the practice. You do everything as though in the presence of God. That is another kind of language, but pointing to the same reality.

Here, God is mindfulness and concentration. Everything that takes place is exposed to the light of mindfulness and concentration, and that energy of mindfulness and concentration is the essence of a Buddha. You know you have the capacity of being a Buddha, if you know how to cultivate that energy of concentration and mindfulness. You may call that energy the energy of God; you may call it the Holy Spirit. Many people in the Christian tradition speak in that way: the Holy Spirit is the energy of God, and it is in us. We can profit from it very well, and in fact we can help it to be generated, and enhance the quality of each minute of our daily lives.

The Buddha warned us about getting caught in rituals. We don't do things for the sake of being polite. All these rituals would be nothing if they were empty of life, namely empty of the energy of mindfulness and concentration. If the energy of mindfulness and concentration is there, you don't need any rituals, but anything that happens may look like a ritual. When the priest celebrates the Eucharist, breaking the bread and pouring the wine, he should not perform it only as a ritual. It is not the gesture and the words that create the miracle of the Eucharist-it is his capacity for being alive, of being present at that moment, it is his capacity for making the whole congregation wake up to being alive, because he breaks the bread in such a way that everyone becomes awake, becomes aware that this piece of bread contains life. That requires strong practice on the part of the priest. If he is not alive, if he is not present, if he does not have the power of mindfulness and concentration, he will not be able to create life in the congregation, in the church. That is why empty rituals do not mean anything. There should be the real thing in it; the real thing we can call the Holy Spirit. Any of us, priest or not priest, monk or not monk, our practice is to generate the Holy Spirit in us, namely the energy of concentration and mindfulness.

Mindfulness and concentration always bring insight, and insight is the liberating factor. We suffer because there is a lack of insight into our nature, and into the nature of reality. In the teaching of the Buddha, the processes-mindfulness, concentration and insight-are the essence of the practice. The energy of mindfulness contains within itself the energy of concentration; and concentration always contains the capacity of seeing deeply. bringing insight. Mindfulness, concentration and insight are the heart, the essence of our practice. So when you practice walking with your feet, each step you make should have mindfulness, concentration and insight. If you do this, you can touch the earth, you become one with the earth, and you dissipate fear and loneliness. There is no other way. The way is the way of mindfulness, concentration and insight. When you breathe you practice the same way: every breath you take generates mindfulness, concentration and insight. The liberating factor is insight. The ultimate aim of the practice is the insight that liberates us from our fear, our ignorance, our loneliness, and our despair. It is that insight that helps us to penetrate deeply into the nature no-birth and no-death, the nature of interbeing. The cream of the Buddhist practice is to touch our true nature of no birth and no death, no separation. We can do that just by very simple practices, breathing in and breathing out, by making a step, by looking, by touching.

(Bell)

The Mindfulness Trainings should be looked upon as the practice of mindfulness, and not as a set of rules. If you look at them as a set of rules, you are caught by what the Buddha described as the attachment to rituals and rules, and this is not a good thing in Buddhism. You should not be a victim of rules and rituals. So be careful when you study and practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Consider them to be an art of mindful living, and not something imposed on you to restrict your freedom. In fact the practice of the Five Mindfulness Trainings will help you to gain more freedom every day.

The monastics have their own set of Five Mindfulness Trainings. Do you know that the monks have 250 mindfulness trainings? And also they have twenty-nine chapters of Mindful Manners. It may be helpful to study the monastic codes. It can help us to understand our practice of the Five Mindfulness Trainings. When a monk or a nun walks, he or she is not supposed to talk, because how can you practice walking deeply, generating mindfulness and concentration, if you talk at the same time? So you may have noticed that when a monk talks, he stops. One thing at a time. He is concentrated on what he is talking about, he is concentrated on what he is listening to, and after that he resumes his walking. Every step he makes should generate mindfulness and concentration. His insight depends on that practice.

Mindfulness Trainings help to protect you, and you may like to read a book about the Ten Mindfulness Trainings of a novice monk or nun, and the twenty-nine chapters of Mindful Manners. If a novice abides by that practice, he will look beautiful as a monk of nun, because mindfulness is his or her adornment. If you live mindfully in every minute of your life, you become a beautiful person, and the energy of mindfulness that you produce protects you and protects the people around you. When you see a monk sitting with a young lady out of the sight of the Sangha, you know that he is not practicing Mindful Manners. It is inscribed in the monastic code that that is one of the things that you should not do. That is to protect you and to protect that lady. You can sit and talk to a lady, but where the Sangha can see you. That is not a restriction, that is a practice to protect you and to protect the Sangha, because if one member of the monastic Sangha is destroyed, the pain will be felt by the whole monastic Sangha. And I think it is good for the lay community to understand that, in order to help protect the monastics at the same time. Everything should be looked upon as the practice of mindfulness, and mindfulness practice is an art, the art of self-protection and the protection of the world around us, including the world of animals, vegetables and minerals. That is why the energy of mindfulness is our savior, and it is our task to generate that energy every day. The collective energy of mindfulness will really be the savior of our situation, of our families.

The day before yesterday we spoke about eight exercises of mindful breathing, and many of you have the book *La Respiration Essentielle*, Breathe! You are Alive, with commentaries on the exercises. We know that there are four areas of mindfulness. The four areas where mindfulness has to penetrate, in order for us to be protected, for joy to be nourished, for pain to be transformed, and for insight to be obtained. These are called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. We know that mindfulness is always mindfulness of something.

The First Foundation of Mindfulness is mindfulness of the body in the body, according to the way the Buddha spoke. "Mindfulness of the body in the body" means that when you bring mindfulness into your body, mindfulness becomes the body. Mindfulness is not an outside observer anymore. Mindfulness becomes the body, and the body becomes mindfulness. When mother embraces child, mother becomes child, and child becomes mother. That is why the Buddha used the expression "mindfulness of the body in the body." In true Buddhist meditation, the subject and the object of meditation no longer exist as separate entities. In fact, that distinction is removed. So when you generate the energy of mindfulness, embracing your breathing, embracing your body, that means mindfulness of the body in the body. Mindfulness is not an outsider observing, but it is the body. The body becomes the object of mindfulness and the subject of mindfulness at the same time.

It is as nuclear scientists in our day say: in order to understand an elementary particle, in order to really enter into the world of the infinitely small, you have to become a participant, and not an observer anymore. In India they use this example to illustrate the fact: a grain of salt would like to know how salty the water of the ocean is. How can a grain of salt understand the degree of salinity of the ocean water? The only way is for the grain of salt to jump into the ocean, and the understanding will be perfect. The separation between object of understanding and subject of understanding is no longer there. In our time, nuclear scientists have begun to see that. That is why they say that in order to really understand the world of the elementary particle, you have to stop being an observer, you have to become a participant.

So, the First Foundation of Mindfulness is our body, and the Second Foundation of Mindfulness is our feelings. And the third area of mindfulness is the mind, namely the mental formations. The Buddha offered us four exercises on mindful breathing to take care of our body. The second area of mindfulness is the feelings, where he also offered four other exercises of mindfulness related to mindful breathing. The third area is the mind. Mind here should be understand as all the mental formations. For the mental formations he also proposed four exercises on mindfulness of mindful breathing.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness, the fourth area that mindfulness has to enter and transform, is the realm of perception. In the sutra it is described as "the objects of mind," and we can understand this as perception. He also proposed four exercises on mindful breathing, so that we can penetrate, embrace and look deeply into the object of our perception, so that we can get the insight that will liberate us from our delusion, our suffering.

So, there are four areas. You understand what the body is, you understand what the feelings are, you understand what the objects of mind are-mountains, river, birds, blue sky, house, stream, children, animals-everything is the object of your perception, and we have four exercises of mindful breathing in order to inquire about the true nature of all these things, including ourselves. In a way, "body" is part of the object of mind, feelings also are part of the object of our mind, and mental formations also become part of the object of our mind, because we can always inquire about the nature of our body, our feelings, or our mind, or other things. But maybe you have not understood what mind is, what mental formations are. "Mental

formations" is a technical term. The Sanskrit word is *Samskara*.

Formation is the term that points to everything that is there, everything that manifests itself according to the law of causes and effects. For example, this sheet of paper is a formation, because many elements have come together to make this exist: the sunshine, the trees, the clouds, the factory, the workers in the factory, and many more elements have come together to produce this sheet of paper, so this sheet of paper is a formation. That flower is a formation. If you look deeply into the flower you see the sunshine. Without sunshine there would be no flower. There is a cloud in it, there are the minerals in the earth, the compost, the gardener, many elements have come together to make the flower manifest. So the flower is a formation, but that is a physical formation. Our anger is a formation, but it is a mental formation. Our fear, our depression, are mental formations. Many elements have come together to make that formation possible. In my tradition of Buddhism we learned that there are fifty-one categories of mental formations-your fear, your despair, your love, your compassion, your mindfulness. Mindfulness is one of the fifty-one categories of mental formations. So you have the mental formation of mindfulness. That is good news, because if you know how to practice every day, then mindfulness can be generated as an energy, to do the work of recognizing, embracing, transforming and healing. Mindfulness is considered to be the Buddha nature in us, and if you know how to cultivate it, the energy of understanding and loving and forgiveness will be born from this kind of practice.

Mental formations may be negative or positive. When you bring mindfulness to the area of mental formations, you recognize them as such. If it is a positive mental formation, and you recognize it as a positive mental formation, your capacity to release, your capacity to be compassionate, your capacity of understanding, your capacity of being joyful, all these are positive mental formations that exist in you. They may be weaker or stronger, but they do exist in you. Sometimes you believe that they don't exist, but that is not right. They may not be strong, they may be covered by many layers of suffering, but they do exist. Your capacity of being enlightened, of being loving, of being forgiving, they are always there in your consciousness, in the form of seeds, *semences*.

Our consciousness may be described as having two layers, or two parts. The upper part is mind consciousness, *le mental*; and underneath there is the store consciousness, which may be translated as *le trefonds*. Store consciousness is like the basement of your house, and mind consciousness is like the living room. In the store consciousness all the fifty-one mental formations are preserved in the form of seeds, *bija* in Sanskrit. They are always there. You may believe that you are not capable of loving, you are afraid of love. You believe that you don't have the capacity of loving, but that is not true. It is always there. You have not been practicing loving, you have not been practicing watering the seed of love, and it seems difficult to love. But if you know how to practice watering the seed of love in you every day, the seed will grow, and you need only to touch it lightly, and it will become a zone of energy called love, manifested in the upper level of your consciousness.

The seed of love, the seed of fear, the seed of forgiveness, the seed of hatred, every time it is touched, will manifest itself in this upper level in the form of energy. If you are mindful, you can recognize it, and now you can call it a mental formation. You can identify it by calling it by its true name. So when you have anger manifested in you, if you know how to breathe in and breathe out and become aware of the fact that the seed of anger has manifested in you, that is mindfulness of anger. " Breathing in, I know that anger is in me. Breathing out, I am embracing my anger." It is as if you touch the seed of mindfulness down here, and invite it up to become another zone of energy, embracing the first zone of energy.

As a practitioner, you never leave negative energy alone, dominating, in your living room. You have to do something-you have to practice. And the practice is to use your mindful in-breath and out-breath, to use your steps, in order to invite the seed of mindfulness to manifest, and then you have energy number two. Using the energy number two, you embrace the energy number one. Mindfulness of anger is what you practice when anger manifests. The practice is just embracing, recognizing, and not fighting, because you know that anger is you, mindfulness is you, and you should not transform yourself into a battlefield. This is not intelligent practice. This is not Buddhist practice, because Buddhist practice is based on the insight of non-duality. This and this both share the same reality. If you have the intention to fight, to repress, to destroy, you transform yourself into a battlefield. That is not recommended.

The idea that anger is evil, that mindfulness is good, and that you should use the good to fight evil, that is not Buddhist. You have to use mindfulness, and embrace your anger in the most tender way possible, like a mother embracing her suffering baby: "Darling, I am here for you. Don't worry, I will take good care of you." Not only do you deal with your anger in that way, but also you deal with your fear, your jealousy and all kinds of suffering in that way. You have to attend to your pain, you have to provide the energy of mindfulness to take care of the blocks of pain in you when they manifest. If you know how to do that, you get relief after ten or fifteen minutes…sometimes longer, but continue the practice of mindful breathing, mindful walking, and other kinds of practice.

Continue to recognize and embrace whatever is there, and you will get relief. If you continue, you may get an insight into its nature, and that insight will be able to transform it. But after five or ten minutes of embracing it, it may go down again into the seed, and you feel much better. But that does not mean that anger has been eliminated from you. Anger has just ceased to be a zone of energy up here, and it has returned to its initial form: a seed. And next time that you or someone else comes and waters it, it will be back again. But one thing is sure: after having been embraced by mindfulness for a few minutes, ten or fifteen minutes, it will go down a little bit weaker. It will always be like that. After taking a bath of mindfulness, your pain and sorrow will be lessened a little bit when they become a seed. If you know how to do it, next time that they manifest you continue the same practice: "My dear little anger, I know you are there, I will take care of you." You are always ready for it. Don't try to suppress it, allow it to come up without fear, because you already have the energy of mindfulness that you have cultivated during the practice.

We know that there are fifty-one categories of mental formations, and we should know also that feelings are one of the fifty-one categories. Feeling is a mental formation, and perception is also a mental formation. But because feelings and perceptions are so important as objects of the practice, the Buddha has singled them out as categories. Therefore, in this category of mind,

you have forty-nine mental formations left. When I was a novice I had to learn by heart all the fifty-one mental formations. I could recite them to you now, in Vietnamese.

So every time a mental formation manifests itself in the upper level of your consciousness, you have to be able to call a mental formation by its true name. You say: "Dear mental formation, I know that you are there, and I will take good care of you." We can do that only if we have enough of that energy called mindfulness. Mindfulness is one of the fifty-one categories.

(Bell)

This Dharma talk is to initiate you into the practice of taking care of your mental formations, and your perceptions. We should continue to learn, and the book I recommended to you is very small, but it can help in the beginning: Breathe! You are Alive, *La Respiration Essentielle*. It is available in Italian and German and many other languages.

For this category, the first exercise, namely the mind: "Experiencing the mental formation, I breathe in; experiencing the mental formation, I breathe out." It means "Recognizing the mental formation, embracing the mental formation I breathe in. Recognizing and embracing the mental formation, I breathe out." You have to recognize it by its true name, whether that is joy, or forgiveness, or hope, or fear, you have to recognize it as it is. Don't try to fight, don't try to get attached to it, just recognize it and embrace it, and become one with it. Become one with it, but without losing yourself in it, because mindfulness is always there. Mindfulness is the protector. Without mindfulness you might get lost in your fear or your anger. But if mindfulness continues to be generated, then you'll never get lost, and mindfulness will continue to penetrate deeply into the zone of energy called fear or anger, and will bring you relief and transformation.

So, the ninth exercise is experiencing the mental formation: "I breathe in, I breathe out." The tenth is gladdening: "Gladdening the mental formation I breathe in, I breathe out." As I understand the sutra, in the light of my own practice, these two exercises are dealing with the positive mental formations that exist in us. Sometimes we ignore the existence of these wonderful positive mental formations in us, so that we don't have confidence in our own selves. That is a complex. We think that we are not worth anything, that the good, the true and the beautiful should be sought from outside, that there is nothing true and beautiful and good in us. This ninth exercise is to change that situation, because if you believe that you are not worth anything, then you suffer; you don't have trust within yourself, you always try to find something outside of yourself. If you have confidence within yourself, you wouldn't need things like hypocrisy, or cosmetics. The use of cosmetics proves that you have no confidence in yourself, in your beauty, in your truth, in your goodness. You want to deceive the other into thinking that you are beautiful, you are good, you are true, so you use cosmetics on hypocrisy. Whether in the realm of the world, or in the spiritual realm, that happens. But the Buddha said that you don't have to use cosmetics, you don't have to be a hypocrite, because you do possess the good, the true and the beautiful. You have to go home to yourself and rediscover these things. That is the Buddha nature in us, the baby Buddha existing in us. And that is the wonderful message of the Buddha. Your are a Buddha-to-be. Don't despise yourself.

There is a bodhisattva whose name is Thuong Bat Khinh, "Never Disparaging." His job is only to go to people and say, "I do not underestimate you, sir; I do not underestimate you, ma'am, because you are a Buddha-to-be." His work is only that, to bring the message of hope and self-respect to people so that they will not be victims of their lack of confidence, victims of low self-esteem. People sometimes threw rocks or tomatoes at that bodhisattva, because they thought he was making fun of them; but he was just trying to bring them the truth that the beautiful, the good and the true do exist, within each of us.

With our efforts of looking deeply, with the help of a brother or a sister in the Dharma, we should be able to identify the positive mental formations within us, in the form of seeds. That is practice in the context of a Sangha. If you are Dharma brother or a Dharma sister to someone, you try to help her to see her own goodness, her own capacity, in order that she will not be a victim of low self-esteem. You can be the therapist, because you are a brother or a sister in the Dharma.

So it is beneficial to identify the good mental formation, to recognize it as existing, to embrace it, and to help it to grow. It's like when you go to your garden, and you know that some trees are dying, and so you are overwhelmed by sorrow from the sight of these trees dying; but you completely ignore that there many beautiful trees still living in your garden. You need this practice to know that there are many beautiful trees there. You need a brother or a sister to remind you that these beautiful trees still exist. This is the practice of embracing the positive, and nourishing the positive, and bringing joy and hope as elements of nourishment. The Buddha is always compassionate. He wants us be fed, to be nourished with positive things that already exist, and therefore in this area of practice, he wants us to recognize the positive seeds, to embrace them, and to make them grow. With the practice of mindfulness and concentration, you bring joy and happiness as nourishment to yourself. It is very important, because you are going to continue.

The next exercise is to recognize and embrace a negative mental formation:

"Concentrating on the mental formation, I breathe in." Your depression, your fear, the conflict within yourself, the conflict between two tendencies, two mental formations within yourself, your jealousy, your despair-all these belong to the category of negative mental formations. Don't be afraid of them. If they want to come up, allow them to come up, and just embrace them. Bring all your energy back to make mindfulness strong, and just embrace them. I do this a lot.

Thirty years ago in Vietnam, all the destruction and death had sown in me many seeds of suffering and pain. There were nights when I stayed awake, I could not sleep, and my practice was to follow my mindful breathing, and embrace the pain, embrace my people, embrace my country, embrace the earth. That is the only practice. By doing so, you do not allow the pain and sorrow to overwhelm you, to destroy you. In the lying position, or in the sitting position, you continue to generate the energy of the Buddha, and embrace it, and you can survive these difficult moments, and you can transform them. Learn the art. Cultivate mindfulness. Be brave in encountering your own suffering, with all your tenderness, all your concentration. And if you need it, a brother or a sister in the Dharma can come and help you to do it. As a practitioner, he also has some amount of

mindfulness, she also has some amount of mindfulness. She can sit next to you and say, "Dear sister, be sure that I am here, bringing my support to you. Be brave, embrace your pain, I am here for you." With that support you are able to do the work.

The twelfth exercise: "Liberating the mental formation, I breathe in and I breathe out." When you embrace your pain with concentration, you have the opportunity to look deeply into the nature of that pain, that sorrow. Mindfulness, concentration and insight will bring relief. Insight will liberate you from that pain. Insight is the flower that grows on the tree of looking deeply, when you bring mindfulness into the realm of perceptions. That is the focus of the last set of four exercises offered by the Buddha, so that we can know how to look deeply into the nature of reality and get emancipated from the suffering, the illusions, the wrong perceptions that are at the base of your suffering.

This is the last Foundation of Mindfulness: contemplation of perceptions in the perceptions, or contemplation of the objects of mind in the objects of mind. You may ask the question: "Where is the fifth?" because last time we have seen that our person is made of five elements, yet here there are only four. Here is the answer: (Thay draws on the board.) We reproduce the orange of the day before yesterday, and the five sections of the orange: form (body), feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. Form is here, the first foundation of mindfulness. Feeling is here, the second foundation of mindfulness. Mental formations are here, as the third foundation of mindfulness. Perception is here, the fourth foundation of mindfulness. How about consciousness? The answer is that consciousness is the ground of all mental formations. Feelings is one mental formation, perception is another mental formation, there is forty-nine other mental formations. And all of these mental formations are a manifestation of consciousness. When you contemplate all of these fifty-one mental formations, you are already contemplating consciousness, because the consciousness is like the water, and all these things are the waves. If you look deeply into the wave, you are already touching the water, you are already seeing the water. That is why feelings, perceptions and mental formations are manifestations of consciousness. And that is why all five sections of the orange, the five elements that make up our persons, are entirely covered by the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The process is very scientific, and this is to serve as instrument for you to begin the practice.

The thirteenth exercise: "Contemplating impermanence, I breathe in." The essence of Buddhist meditation is *Vipashyana* (*Vipassana* in Pali). That means looking deeply into the nature of things in order to understand the true nature of reality, the true nature of your joy and suffering. What does it mean to look deeply? Looking deeply is to use all your mindfulness, all your concentration to inquire about the reality that is in front of you, the object of your inquiry. The Buddha has provided us many keys, many instruments to enable us to succeed in the work of looking deeply. The first instrument is called impermanence. You look in such a way that you can discover the impermanent nature of everything that is.

Intellectually, we all know that everything is impermanent, that everything is changing, but that is only the intellect. I am to grow old. The person with whom I live, tomorrow will be old, or may go away. That is part of impermanence. We know it intellectually, but practically we live as if we don’t know that things are impermanent. If you really had the insight of impermanence, you would not live like that. You would be much wiser. You speak as if that person is going to be like that for one thousand years, and you speak as if you are going to be like this for another one thousand years, but this is not true. We are not the same in two consecutive moments. If you really have the insight of impermanence, you will be able to release everything that is not essential, and you will be able to live deeply every moment of your daily life. We are caught by many, many things that are not essential, and we lose our lives just because of that. We are not capable of releasing, and that is why there is no freedom and no happiness. When you know that things are impermanent, you will be able to recognize what is really essential for your life and your happiness, and you will have the courage to let go of other things. When you have the insight of impermanence, you will not wait. You will do anything you can do today to make the person you love happy. Because you don’t have that insight, that is why you don’t do it. And then one day she is no longer there, and you cry, and you repent: "While she was alive I did not do that; now I regret it."

Impermanence brings a lot of insight, and you become very wise and you know how to live in such a way that happiness can be possible in the here and the now. I have a short poem that I have shared with so many people, and they like to use it when they get angry at the other person, the person that they love the most.

Getting angry at each other in the ultimate dimension.

We should only close our eyes and look into the future.

In about one hundred years from now,

Where will you be, and where shall I be?

That is the insight of impermanence. When you get angry at her or at him, you want to punish him or her to get relief. That is a natural tendency. But if you just close your eyes and visualize yourself and your beloved one three hundred years from now, you will get the insight of impermanence. Just one in-breath and one out-breath, that is enough for you to get the insight. When you open your eyes, you only want to do one thing. That is to open your arms and hug that person. That is the only thing worth doing, to cherish her presence, because of impermanence. Because you are unaware of the nature of impermanence in everything, you get angry.

(Bell)

We suffer not because things are impermanent. We suffer because things are impermanent, but we don’t know that they are impermanent. This is very important. That is why it is very helpful to practice mindful breathing, in order to bring the insight of impermanence to ourselves, and to keep it alive. Then we know what to do and what not to do to make life more pleasant. Looking into a flower, looking into a cloud, looking into a living being, you touch the nature of impermanence. How important is impermanence? Without impermanence, nothing can be possible. Don’t complain about impermanence. If things are not

impermanent, how could a grain of corn become a corn plant? How could your child grow up? So impermanence is the ground of life. But in spite of the fact that things are impermanent, we are not aware of that nature of impermanence in life. So when you practice looking deeply into things, you should discover the nature of impermanence, and you should make it into a living insight. A living insight means that you carry it in every minute of your life, and then you become a wise man, a wise woman, and you get rid of so much of your pain and sorrow and delusion.

Impermanence in the teaching of the Buddha also means interbeing, non-self. Because things change every moment, nothing can remain the same in two consecutive moments. There are no permanent entities; there is no permanent self. You have no permanent self. A flower is made only of non-flower elements. You are made of entirely non-you elements. That is the truth. You are made of ancestors, air, water, education, sunshine, clouds, and so on. You are a formation. You are beautiful, but you are a formation. Every formation is impermanent. That sentence is repeated many times over by the Buddha: all formations are impermanent. We should grasp it, we should touch it with our experience, and not just our intellect.

A flower cannot be by itself alone, because it has no separate self. A flower can only inter-be with the sunshine, with the clouds, with the earth. If you remove the element sunshine from the flower, the flower will collapse. If you remove the element cloud, meaning water, from the flower, the flower will collapse. So a flower is full of everything. Everything in the cosmos can be found in the flower: sunshine, clouds, minerals, earth, time, space, humans, everything. Only one thing is lacking in the flower-that is a separate existence, a separate self. Now you understand what is meant by "non-self."

Non-self does not mean non-existing; non-self means you don't have a separate existence, like the flower. A flower is there, full of the whole cosmos, but not having a separate entity. There is no such thing as permanent and separate. There's nothing that can be permanent, that can be separate. Everything is impermanent, everything has the nature of interbeing. Nothing can be by itself alone, everything has to inter-be with everything else. The Buddha expressed that reality in very, very simple terms: "**This** is, because **that** is." If you had asked about the Buddhist teaching on Genesis, about how the world has come to be, the Buddha would have said: "This is, because that is." That is the law of interbeing, the law of interdependent origination, the law of no self. "No self" does not mean non-existing. Everything is, in a wonderful way, but everything is a formation.

When you practice embracing the object of your perception, whether that is a flower, or a cloud, or your anger, or a person, you know that all of these are formations, and that all formations are impermanent. But if you look more deeply, impermanence and interbeing open to you the dimension called Nirvana. Nirvana is the nature of no-birth and no-death. How can nirvana go along with impermanence and non-self? The answer is that it is exactly because things are impermanent and without a separate self that their nature is the nature of Nirvana. It means the nature of no-birth and no-death. Look at the cloud. The cloud is impermanent-it can be transformed into rain at any moment. And yet you cannot reduce a cloud to nothingness. A cloud can never die. Do you think that a cloud can die? To die means that from something you suddenly become nothing, from someone you suddenly become no one at all. That is our idea of death. This meditation of the Buddha looks into that notion of death. Death is not a reality, because nothing can become nothingness. A sheet of paper, when you try to destroy it, when you burn it, you cannot reduce it into nothingness. It will become smoke, it will become heat, and it will become ash. And the smoke will join a cloud, the ash will join the earth, and the heat will join human beings and other beings, and penetrate into the cosmos. If you like, you can follow the journey of the sheet of paper.

So it is not possible to reduce anyone or anything into nothingness. The nature of this sheet of paper is no-death. When the cloud is struck by a wave of cold air, it becomes the rain, but the cloud is not scared. In the cloud there is the wisdom that being a cloud floating in the blue sky is wonderful, but being rain falling on the field, on the ocean, is also something wonderful. You cannot reduce the cloud into nothingness. Annihilation is not a reality, it's not possible. Annihilation, non-being, is the opposite of permanence. Permanence is only an idea, and annihilation is another idea, another extreme. A separate and permanent self is one extreme; and nothingness, non-being, annihilation is another extreme. Reality transcends these two extremes. That is called the Middle Way.

The Middle Way, the *Madhyamika* way, is the way of transcending pairs of opposites, including the notion of birth and the notion of death. In our minds, to be born means that from nothing you suddenly become something, from no one you suddenly become some one. But that is not possible. Before the sheet of paper was born, was it nothing? No, it was a tree, it was the sunshine, it was the rain. If you look deeply into the sheet of paper, you will identify the rain that helped the trees to grow, you will identify the chlorophyll, you will identify the gases in the air, you will identify the cloud, and you will identify the sunshine. So it was not really born. You begin to see that the sheet of paper is only a moment of continuation, the moment of your birth is only a moment of continuation, you have been there before you were born, in one form or another. Before the cloud was born, it was there already in the form of the ocean, the heat helped the water in the ocean to become a cloud. So its former life was water, and in its present life it is a cloud. Maybe the next life will be snow, or ice, or rain.

Every moment of transformation is a continuation, and on your birthday it makes sense to sing: "Happy Continuation Day to You." That can apply also for the moment of your so-called death. That is also a moment of continuation. The process of continuation takes place every moment. I'm very mindful that, when in the process of teaching my students, monks, nuns and lay people, I am re-born every minute in them. My job is to transmit my joy, my insight, to them. That is done in every minute, not by Dharma talks, but by living my life: walking, sitting, eating, talking, smiling are acts of transmission. My students have carried me in them. Someone might like to shoot me down, as they have shot Martin Luther King, or Gandhi. They thought they could reduce these men to nothingness, but you know that these two people continue among us, stronger than ever. They are reborn. They lived their lives, and they get reborn every moment. It is not easy to follow their journey-just as when you burn the sheet of paper, it's very hard to follow its journey. You have to go to the sky to observe the clouds, you have to go the cosmos to observe the heat, you have to go to the earth to observe the ash, and in a few months the sheet of paper might be seen in the form of a tiny flower in the grass. Tomorrow you may get a drop of rain on your head, and that may have been the sheet of paper that you burned today. "Hello there again!" And you may see a little flower in the grass in a few months, and

that is a continuation of the sheet of paper that you burned today.

In Zen circles, sometimes you may be offered a subject of meditation such as: "Disciple, tell me how you looked before the birth of your grandmother?" That is a very nice invitation for you to go on a journey to look for yourself, for your nature, the true nature of no-birth and no-death. The true nature of a cloud is the nature of no-birth and no-death, no beginning and no end. That nature goes by the name of "Nirvana." Nirvana means extinction; extinction means the extinction of all notions. First of all, the extinction of all notions like birth and death, being and non-being, permanence and annihilation-all pairs of opposites are erased by the insight of Nirvana. Your true nature is the nature of no-birth and no-death. You may call it God if you like, but in the Buddhist terminology, it is Nirvana, the extinction of all notions. When conditions are sufficient and something manifests, you call it existing, being. And if some condition is lacking, and that something hides itself away, it does not manifest anymore, you call it non-existing, no being. But the reality transcends both being and non-being.

Metaphysics is described as the "science of being," the study of being*. L'Etre entend qu'etre.* But in the light of the Buddhist teaching, being is just an idea, and non-being is just another idea. Reality is free from these two notions. I used to say, "To be, or not to be, that is **not** the question." That is why the practice of looking deeply can help us to touch the nature of no-birth and no-death, and help us to transcend all kinds of fear, especially fear of non-being. There are people who are afraid of being. They try to kill themselves. There are people who are afraid of non-being. All these fears, all these kinds of craving can be removed by the insight of Nirvana.

The Buddha said that Nirvana can be touched with your own body. Nirvana is in the here and the now. If you look into a wave, you can see the water. The wave can live her life as a wave, of course, but the wave can live the life of water at the same time. As a wave, she is supposed to be born, and to die, to be high, or to be low, to be more or less beautiful than other waves. But if she touches the water within herself, and recognizes that she is water at the same time, then she is no longer afraid of coming up, going down, birth and death, being more or less beautiful, because she knows that she "inter-is" with every other wave, and with the water. So water is the ultimate dimension of reality, and wave is the historical dimension of reality. But the two dimensions are not separated; if you throw away the wave, you won't have any water left; and if you throw away the water, you won't have a wave. That is why, touching the wave deeply, you touch water, and when you touch reality in its nature of impermanence and interbeing, you touch the nature of Nirvana, that will release you of all your fears. For those of us who have terminal illnesses, who have been contemplating death and dying, this is a very important practice. Not only for those who are in their terminal illness, but for all of us.

Sooner or later, we will have to take up the practice, because fear is always in us, insecurity is always in us, and that makes us suffer. To practice looking deeply, in order to touch Nirvana, is a very important practice. If you go to a Buddhist center to practice, that means that you want to get relief. You can suffer less, you can get relief, but the greatest relief of all you can only get when you are capable of touching Nirvana. Touching Nirvana is to get the greatest relief from fear of non-being, since things continue to be, things continue to manifest themselves in one form or other. Beneath these differences, the ground remains the same thing. Nirvana is the ground of our being, it is the nature of no-birth and no-death, and it is the extinction of all these notions like birth and death, being and non-being, permanence and annihilation, and also the extinction of all the sufferings that have been created by these notions. Our fear, our despair, our suffering…most of them are born from our illusions, our notions. You get angry because you have a notion. You get jealous because you have a notion. Even your notion of happiness, you have to get rid of it. Suppose you believe that you have to get that diploma, that position, you have to marry that person, otherwise life will not be worth living. So you have an idea of happiness, and you become a victim of that idea. Happiness can come in many thousands of ways, but you have already closed all the doors, and you have only opened one door. That is the notion you have of your happiness. It's very important to remove that notion of happiness. Allow happiness to come freely, and you have one million more chances to be happy. So even your idea of happiness is a notion, and you have to touch Nirvana by letting go of that notion. It is very easy to be happy, but you have forbidden yourself to be happy by establishing an idea of happiness. That is why Nirvana is the abolition of all ideas and notions, and also all the sufferings that are born from these notions and ideas. That is the essence of looking deeply.

"Contemplating Nirvana, I breathe in; contemplating non-craving, I breathe out." If you look deeply into the nature of things, your craving will vanish. It's not worth your time and your efforts. There are many objects of our craving: fame, sex, money, and good food-I mean the food that can bring a lot of trouble into your body. Looking deeply into the nature of these objects of our craving, you see that they are very dangerous. Not only can they not bring you happiness, but also they will destroy your body and your mind. Those of us who have tried that already have that experience and that insight. Happiness is not made of those objects of craving; happiness is made of freedom, of insight, of compassion, of true love. We can cultivate insight, freedom, compassion, love, and become very happy. Happiness cannot be without freedom. Those of us who have no freedom have no possibility to be happy. How free we are, we know by ourselves. We don't need another person to tell us how free we are from our afflictions, from our ideas, especially from our ideas. Therefore, looking deeply into the nature of what we crave is a deep practice.

The fish sees a beautiful bait, but the fish does not know that inside the bait there is a hook. The fish just swallows the bait, and gets caught by the hook, and gets pulled out of the water. We behave like the fish: we don't know the true nature of the object of our craving. We have become, many times, the victims of such craving, and we have suffered a lot, and yet we continue the course of running after these objects of craving. When you can see deeply into the nature of your craving, you get free. The Buddha described in many terms the nature of our craving. He said, "Like a person holding a torch and going against the wind, the fire will burn his hand. Those who go after the object of their craving will get burned, bodily and spiritually. Like a dog running after a piece of bare bone, and trying to eat it, no matter how many hours the dog bites at the piece of bare bone, he does not get any satisfaction." No matter how much time we spend with the object of our craving, we cannot get the satisfaction, fulfillment. We think it is happiness, but it is not happiness. Happiness is something else. It is not love, love is something else. It is not freedom, freedom is something else. When you read *the Sutra on the Better Way to Catch a Snake*,

you see how the Buddha described the objects of our craving, and he helped us learn how to look in order to see the dangers of these cravings. Of course we want to attain true happiness. There is a way to attain true happiness, and the practice of looking deeply helps us because when we have seen the true nature of our happiness we no longer cling to the object of our craving.

"Contemplating throwing away, I breathe in." "Throwing away" means throwing away ideas. The Vietnamese Zen teacher, Tang Hoi, who lived in the Third Century taught Buddhist meditation in Vietnam, and he went to South China and taught Buddhist meditation in the time of the Three Kingdoms. He described this practice as throwing away, first of all, the two notions. First is the notion that you are this body, "this body is me." The second notion is that "this life span is my life span", meaning that I did not exist before, and that I will not exist after this life span. So these are two basic ideas to throw away. Many of us are caught in the idea that these bodies are ourselves, and this is the origin of a lot of fear and suffering. You are more than this body; you are more than the elements of water, fire, air and earth in this body. You are large, much larger. Your nature is no-birth and no-death. You can be seen, you can be perceived, you can be touched everywhere, at any time. Your manifestation transcends time and space, because your true nature is the nature of no-birth and no-death, like water. You are not limited to the form and the sight of a wave, because you are water. That is why you have to meditate, in order to throw away the idea that "this body is me, that I am only this body." You have to transcend that; you have to throw away that idea.

The second notion is that you were born at a certain point in time, and that you will die and become nothing after that point in time. That notion, that idea, has to be removed too, because your true nature is no-birth and no-death. And the true nature of a flower is also like that, and of a cloud is also like that. This is a very important practice of looking deeply that can help you to liberate yourself from all kinds of anxiety and fear. I think this practice, this insight, can be very helpful to modern psychotherapy, which aims only at restoring a healthy self, that we have lost. But what is meant by "a healthy self?" That is the question. True healing and the greatest relief can only be obtained with the insight of no self. That does not mean that you are not there. No self does not mean non-existing.

(Bell)

Today we will have the opportunity to participate in a formal meal, as seen in monastic life. Please come with us into the meditation hall for the formal meal. The monastics will wear their orange Sanghati robes. We will practice taking the food and walking as in the time of the Buddha, mindfully each step, and you will do the same. The practice is called "one sitting lunch", and the whole time of eating is practice. Mindfulness and concentration are always present. You enjoy every moment of the lunch. During the lunch we eat in such a way that peace, stability and joy are possible. We don't think of the past or the future or anything. We just focus our attention on the food, and on the community of brothers and sisters around us. Dwelling in the present moment, allowing ourselves to be in the Sangha, and carried by the Sangha, as if the Sangha were a boat. We will profit from the collective energy of the Sangha.

If you participate, if you are there with us, please practice mindfulness of breathing, so that you have something to contribute to the Sangha. The collective energy of mindfulness will be strong. There will be a short chanting to offer the food to the Buddha, to the bodhisattvas and also to the living beings. There will be a chant of four lines by a novice monk to share the food with living beings, and during that time we will all practice being mindful, and send our energy of compassion to those living beings in the world who do not have anything to eat. The act of sharing is to water the seed of compassion in every one of us. We will enjoy eating together slowly, peacefully, and it will be very nourishing to our bodies and our souls at the same time. So please join us.

(Three bells)

(End of Dharma talk)